

## SCIENCE AND CULTISM\*

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Now and then the medical profession is upbraided by the proponents of various notions in the field of health and science because it fails to give to their claims what they conceive to be adequate consideration. Again and again, the difficulties of Galileo, Harvey, Jenner and Pasteur, when they attempted to convince the leaders of their times of the importance of their discoveries, are cited as evidence that scientists are intolerant. Apparently cultists and others who have had but little experience in reasoning and logic, or with what is known as the scientific method, fail to take into account the fact that the world has moved since the time of the prophets, and that science has advanced more in the past fifty years than in the previous fifty centuries. James Harvey Robinson wrote an interesting essay on "The Importance of Being Historically Minded." With a proper perspective, one realizes that science is today in a position to demand evidence to an extent that might not have been warranted in a previous period when the whole world was dominated by magic and mysticism.

Recently, Mr. Chester Rowell, feature writer for the San Francisco *Chronicle*, discussed the appeal for tolerance made by faith-healing cults in the Los Angeles *Times*, following an exposé by the editor of *The Journal* of some of the weird quackeries existing in Los Angeles. Mr. Rowell says:

But the appeal for "tolerance," by one "school" of another, is an example of a common fallacy. There is no "tolerance" of astrology by astronomers. There is no "tolerance" of fortune-telling by psychologists, nor of perpetual motion inventors by physicists. Geologists do not locate oil or water by

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dowsing with a forked stick, nor "tolerate" those who do. Entomologists do not "tolerate" those who would exterminate insect pests by interfering with their spontaneous generation. Scientific agriculture does not "tolerate" the theory that potatoes grow wrong unless planted in the dark of the moon. All these "schools" exist, and they are all rejected outright as unscientific superstitions by every scientist in the world.

On the other hand, good Catholics tolerate the Holy Rollers, and Buddhists tolerate the Mormons. Atheists tolerate the faith of Christians and Christians the unfaith of atheists. Protestants and Christian scientists tolerate each other's religion, each respecting the right of the other to seek God in his own way. But the law of the land did not tolerate polygamy, when the Mormons said it was religion, and the Regents of the University of California do not permit an antivaccinationist student to endanger the health of other students, even though he calls his objection religious.

So in medicine. If it were a matter of faith, dogma or canons, one "school" should "tolerate" another. If it is a matter of science, then the only distinction is that of scientific and unscientific. And between science and non-science there is no equality of right, and no basis for tolerance. The fact that millions of devout people in India believe in casting their horoscopes by the stars does not erect them into a "school" of astronomy, nor impose on astronomy any obligation to recognize them. They are neither "regular" nor "irregular" astronomers—they are not astronomers at all. Neither is any unscientific theory or practice of healing any part of the science of medicine. There are only two sorts of medicine, scientific and unscientific. And of the unscientific "schools," science has only this to say—that they are unscientific.

How, then, shall we distinguish which principles and practices of healing are scientific, and which are not? The simplest test is that which we unhesitatingly apply in every other branch of knowledge. That is the judgment of scientists. If the scientists say that a certain thing is scientific, we accept it as such. If they all say it is unscientific, we say likewise, at least until it has succeeded in convincing them. Every scientific university in the world teaches astronomy, and not one teaches astrology. All of them teach chemistry and not one teaches alchemy. Every university in the world teaches scientific medicine, and not one of them—not a single one in the whole world—teaches or recognizes any of the "schools" or sects for which the *Times* speaks. If the unanimous voice of science means anything, this is its verdict.

The next test, and the decisive one, is that of method. Scientists may be mistaken, sometimes, in their results and conclusions. Sometimes a thing which seems true in the light of incomplete information becomes only partly true in the light of later discoveries. But science is not mistaken in its method. That method is systematic observation and experiment, and the submission of these observations and experiments to the scientists of the world, for them to repeat, to test and to scrutinize. Whatever pursues that

method and is approved by the test is scientific—including, in medicine, light rays for tuberculosis, diet for many ailments and hydrotherapy for certain mental conditions. Whatever does not proceed by that method, or fails by that test, is unscientific—including all the cults, sects and schools which Dr. Fishbein rejects and the *Times* defends.

Mr. Rowell has placed his finger unerringly on the weaknesses of the cultists. His logic might well serve as a text in the schools, not only that it might aid the younger generation in learning the art of reasoning and judgment, but also that physicians might realize the basic folly of the strange schemes which are constantly being introduced to the public around them.

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